

Red Rabbit Run

by Blueberry Gone Red

Category: Magicians

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Alice Q., Elliot W., Penny, Quentin C.

Pairings: Penny/Alice Q.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-09 04:18:03

Updated: 2016-04-20 03:02:56

Packaged: 2016-04-27 21:28:16

Rating: M

Chapters: 3

Words: 15,310

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Penny is a mind reader. Alice is the only one who can shut him out. He is her white rabbit. Where he goes, she follows. He sees her following him into the darkness. He tries to keep her safe. He sees his future stained red. He tells her not to follow. Alice won't let him go.

1. Stage 1

Author's Note: This is an alternate universe, Penny-Alice pairing story based on the characters of the SyFy Magicians series. I've converted a lot of plots and character traits that fans of the series can spot throughout the story. Some of the characters are introduced later in the story so if you don't see your favorites, you will soon! Enjoy!

****Stage 1****

"Why won't anyone come over here?"

Quentin asked this question out loud, but he knew deep down that the answer was obvious. His huge eyebrows, his unassuming baby face and unattractively slick hair made him look like the biggest geek in school, not to mention the fact that he was known for being clumsy and he wore a big red cape every day that his mother had given him before she died when he was still a young boy. Idaho State High School for the Changed looked like the last place he should be, especially when he couldn't even go so far as to use his ability because of his fear of heights.

Alice sat next to him on the green picnic table while they watched the many students walk past them. It were as if they weren't there. Alice always wore dresses, and today she was wearing a white floral dress with long white earrings, making her look like an actress from a classic film. The only thing that made her look modern out of her

tiny frame and delicate features were her red running shoes, which she always wore.

Behind her sat Penny. He was leaning against the tree that was growing through a large hole in the picnic table, and he pretended not to notice those around him while he scribbled in his notebook. His caramelized skin and muscular frame was hidden by a worn jacket and white button up shirt, as well as time tested jeans and black boots. The thick stubble on his face hid most signs of a smile if he ever made one, and he was known for barely speaking a word. Not because he didn't want to, but because he didn't need to.

This was a high school for irregular people. People with magical powers.

"We're the freaks of this school, Quentin. They don't come over here because everyone else thinks they aren't a freak," Alice said passively, as if stating a fact but not feeling bad about what she was calling herself.

"So we're the freaks of the freaks, right?" Quentin asked, feeling disgruntled.

"I guess you could say that," Alice replied, still remaining undeterred by their social status.

Quentin sighed and swallowed hard as the other students continued to pass them, no one really looking their way. He observed Alice's demeanor for a moment, then told her, "You know, you don't have to stay. You're really pretty, you shouldn't have to hang out with freaks like us..."

He glanced over at Penny. Quentin had yet to have an encounter with Penny, but he feared that he could get punched for what he said. Penny cast him a quick glare, and Quentin corrected himself, saying, "...like me."

Alice turned to look at Penny, but he was once again immersed in his notebook. She knew he had given Quentin some kind of a look, and she pursed her lips, giving him the same stern look she always made when she didn't like what had been done. He didn't meet her gaze, so she turned back to look at the students and continued, "I've been going to this school all four years. I know the people well enough to know that I would rather stay with the freaks."

"What about Eliot? He lives with us and goes to school with us, but he is Captain of the football team, most popular guy in school, and he dates a guy that looks like a model."

Alice and Quentin both turned their attention to Eliot, who was standing near the doors with a few other well off guys around him, all of them laughing and joking. He looked as if he was a celebrity guest surrounded by people, too cool for this school, yet he tolerated it for a reason no one could guess.

Sighing, Alice answered, "Eliot is the worst kind of freak. He pretends that he's not a freak, wearing a mask his entire life to keep up the appearance that he's the best thing that ever happened to the planet. Later in his life, he'll start crumbling on the inside, but he won't ever be able to take off his mask for fear of what would

happen to him if he did. By the end of it all, his outside world will crumble with him, and he'll be alone and without, not knowing what hit him."

Penny glanced at her and smiled slightly, agreeing with some of her points, but she didn't see him. She only saw Quentin smile as he said, "Well then, I guess it's better to be an obvious freak."

Gym class came all too early for the students of Idaho Changed, as they liked to call the school. It didn't matter if they were able to fly, produce fire in their hands, or hear bullets being shot on the other side of the world, they were still required to do the same thing all students did, and one of those things included gym class.

Seated on the bleachers with their awkward purple and gray school colored gym clothes, everyone kept their eyes open, but that was the extent of their interest. Coach Ramell was a squatted looking woman, with long brown hair that was always tied back, and a deliberate looking face. She didn't take much hassle from anyone, even though she could produce no powers herself and she often dealt with very powerful students half her age. Alice was the only student that liked Coach Ramell, more because of the sheer guts she presented than anything.

"Alice, we've got some new shoes in for you. Let's test them out and see if they work."

Coach Ramell pulled out a pair of white running shoes from a box. They looked simple enough, but probably weren't if Alice was testing them. The building they were using for gym was large and closed off, with padded walls and unusual looking bungees and other ropes toward the far walls. It was a place to conduct tests, so students could master their abilities and find what worked for them. With Alice's ability, she had gone through forty-seven pairs of shoes since the beginning of the year, but Coach Ramell was certain that they would find a pair that worked best for her.

Alice got up from the bleachers and practically bounced her way toward the Coach, full of energy as always. She was naturally an energetic person, which helped her to balance between Penny's closed off attitude and Quentin's anxious nature. Watching from the bleachers were other students, mostly male for this hour, with Penny in the far corner away from the rest of the group, and Quentin up front cheering Alice on. Across from Quentin was Marty Acker, a right hand man and fellow football teammate to Eliot, as well as a huge jerk. He had short, spiked blond hair and a clever smile that brought light into his watchful brown eyes. He was the guy Quentin watched out for, not only because he was a bully to those less fortunate, but he had been watching Alice very closely since Christmas break, and that was a sign he was hunting down fresh meat to be his new girlfriend.

Alice took the pair of shoes from the Coach, then she put them on carefully over her max-formula socks, created to withstand heat and high temperatures for an extended period of time. The socks came in handy when the shoes didn't. A small pool of water was waiting at the other side of the building, just against the far wall. Coach Ramell set her mileage counter to zero, and Alice took her mark. Coach blew her whistle, and Alice was off.

It only lasted two or three seconds, or at least that's what Penny always counted before she stopped. She managed to always come to a halt just before hitting the wall, which seemed surprising at her speed. It was hard for the students to see her at her full potential as she moved so fast, the human eye couldn't keep up with her. Once Alice had made it to the wall on the other side of the building, almost 500 feet from where she was originally, she grabbed her side and sweat covered her body as if she had been running for miles. Her shoes were steaming, almost about to burst into flames. Alice jogged over to the pool of water and stepped into it, allowing her shoes to sizzle out. Coach Ramell had already stopped her counter, and checked it to see how fast Alice was going in those two or three seconds:

120MPH

Coach stared at the numbers a good few seconds before shouting, "You broke your record, Alice. Got One-Twenty today."

Although they pretended not to show it, Penny could feel that the other students were amazed, mostly the guys, at Alice's impressive mileage. He was impressed himself, but no one would ever know that. Alice nodded her head and got out of the pool of water, taking off what was left of the new shoes as she said with a neutral tone, "Oh, neat."

She was not known for being enthusiastic in her words, but she was also not known for being mean or demeaning, either. Penny searched for a possible thought from her to know if she were cheering on the inside, but he couldn't reach inside of her head, now. She sometimes blocked him off, the only person he knew of who could do that.

Coach Ramell looked down at Alice's new shoes, now in a pile on the floor and said, "We'll keep looking. There has to be a good pair out there for you."

"Thanks, Coach," Alice said, taking off her socks as well.

"Alright, let's move on. Quentin Coldwater, your turn."

Quentin swallowed hard again, a habit he used a lot to stifle his stress. He got up from the bleachers, barely able to walk forward. He hated when it was his turn. Acker snickered from a few yards away, and Quentin ignored it. Even changed out into his gym clothes, he still wore his thin red cape that his mother gave to him. Coach Ramell allowed it, only because Quentin almost went to the psychiatric unit the last time it was taken from him. Knowing it was useless, but trying every day anyway, Coach asked the students, "Who would like to volunteer to help Mr. Coldwater today?"

Alice always raised her hand, and she did so again today as she went to put on the pair of running shoes she brought from home. Coach Ramell saw her hand up, but still looked at the other students, saying, "Come on guys, Alice has volunteered every day this year. Would anyone else like to try?"

The lack of hands in the air didn't deter the Coach, but Quentin kept his head down, feeling uneasy. With a long and irritated sigh, Coach Ramell looked at Alice and said, "Alright, you two get

started."

Alice bounced up from the floor and made her way to the far wall, where a bungee cord was attached to a yellow jacket that wrapped around a person's upper body. It was a strange contraption, but one that was useful for certain abilities. Quentin looked up at the ceiling, as if deciding if he wanted to be up there or not, his palms becoming sweaty and his eyelids twitching a bit. The Coach moved out of the way, and Alice had herself strapped in as she used another rope by the wall to climb up to a nearby window, just ten feet above the ground. Once she was in the windowsill, she waited.

Quentin closed his eyes and thought hard, chanting something to himself no one else could hear. He began to lift off of the ground, slowly at first, as if he were merely jumping up, then it became a little faster, allowing him to float higher up. He had made it only a few feet into the air when he opened his eyes and looked down. Seeing that he was off the ground, he was still intensely nervous, but he smiled, feeling accomplished.

Alice jumped off from the windowsill, the bungee and jacket strapped around her holding her up in the air, being held up by the wheels that followed steel beams in the ceiling of the gym. As she glided closer to Quentin, she reached out to him, but he wasn't quite at her level yet. He looked up at her and smiled, saying, "I'm doing it!"

"I know, I can see you! It's awesome up here, Quentin!" Alice said, encouraging him.

"You've only got a couple more feet and you'll break your personal record, Mr. Coldwater," Coach Ramell said from the sidelines, watching him lift himself a little higher.

Unfortunately, Acker chose that moment to make his comments. He said to some guys next to him as loudly as possible, "Come on, he's not even as high as Alice and she can't fly!"

Alice was gliding away from Quentin, and he broke eye contact with her to look down at Acker. His confidence deflating, Quentin began imitating what he felt, lowering toward the ground. Coach Ramell gave Acker a warning glare, while Alice shouted, "Don't listen to him, Q."

"Don't defend him, Speed! You'll make yourself look as stupid as he is!" Acker stated to her.

Still losing power, Quentin glided closer to the floor. Alice glared at Acker saying, "You're just jealous because all you have is the ability to be a dumbass!"

Laughter broke out among the students on the bleachers, and Quentin couldn't help but snicker himself. Acker focused only on Quentin's reaction, getting up as he said, "You're dead, geek!"

Acker's hands and arms began to turn red, heating up to an extreme temperature. He did not produce flames, but his arms were steaming as he made his way to Quentin. Now completely in fear, Quentin fell the couple of feet to the ground and began backing up. Coach Ramell thankfully stepped between them, stating with a finger in Acker's

face, "Don't you dare make a scene on my time, Mr. Acker, or you'll be sitting out the rest of the season."

Alice had made it to the windowsill on the opposite wall, and she was ready to climb down if things went from bad to worse. Quentin remained frozen in place, watching Acker give the Coach a dual face. First, he seemed like he may just push her out of the way and fry Quentin anyway, then his arms and hands began to change back into their original color again, and he said with a forced smile, "Yes, ma'am."

Penny looked up at Alice, noticing a stream of thoughts being produced from her mind. He read them easily in his own mind, hearing the voice of her own doubt say within her, "I shouldn't have said that...Quentin will be in trouble...I caused it...shouldn't have said that..."

Her eyes began to move toward Penny to meet his gaze, so, as he always did, he looked away before she noticed that he was observing her.

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><p>Alice, Quentin and Penny walked home after school, all going to the same place. None of them had parents or a home of their own, so they lived with Dr. John Thorough in the Willow Point Orphanage. Dr. Thorough had no abilities, but he owned and operated the schools, homes and hospitals for the kids and teenagers that did in Idaho state. He had taken Alice, Quentin, Penny and Eliot under his wing, and converted his own home into their own private sanctuary out in the country, about a mile from school. Penny never understood why Alice bothered to walk regularly when he knew full well she could run ahead of them and make her way home in no time. Still, every day, since they were kids, she would walk with both he and Quentin.<p>

"I think he's going to beat me up," Quentin said, gearing the subject toward his thoughts about Acker's outburst earlier that day.

Alice had several school and notebooks in her hands, and she was struggling a little to keep them in place. Penny walked only a step behind her, listening to the conversation without having to use his own words for it. Alice continued to manage an easier way to hold her books while she said, "He won't come after you, Quentin. He's too chicken to do that."

A smaller green book slipped out from the pile in Alice's arms, landing on the ground. She turned to pick it up, but Penny got to it first. He held out his hand, and the book glided up to him with ease. He had been working on his telekinetic abilities as well as his telepathy since he was a child, growing stronger every year. This year, he was observing how much weight he could pick up using only his mind. He had been able to nearly lift the front of Dr. Thorough's car off the ground just by thinking about it, but he had yet to keep more than ninety pounds up for more than a second or so. He still wasn't able to stop anything already moving either, testing his ability on some birds and a baseball so far. He kept the book in his hand, not handing it back to Alice, but still meeting her gaze.

She was the only person he had ever met who didn't look at him with confusion in her eyes.

Not taking the book from his hands, or attempting to get it back from him, she only replied, "Thank you, Penny."

Suddenly, a big black truck flew backwards into their path, the tires gliding up on the sidewalk and into the school's yard with no pity for the bugs and grass that were demolished in its path. Acker appeared at the driver's side, practically beaming with a generous smile, as if he were the best thing to appear at that moment. He began to open his door, but Alice jumped ahead of Quentin and Penny and drop-kicked the door closed with all her might, making a loud thud against the truck as she stated angrily, "Don't even think I'm going to let you get out to mess with us, Acker!"

Penny loved the fire that burned in Alice when she was being protective.

Acker's smile dropped, and he leaned out the window a little to scan his driver's side door for dents from the force of Alice's kick before he responded, "Actually, I came to talk to you. In private."

Not skipping a beat, Alice answered, "I still wouldn't let you out of your truck because I don't want to talk to you!"

"Just give me a minute, alright? One minute, and then you can go home with your...buddies."

Penny noticed that Acker had a very hard time referring to them as anything other than freaks, geeks, or turds. Alice sighed heavily, then answered, "Fine, I guess I can give you one minute, but if you try anything, I'll kick you so hard you'll be looking for your balls on Main street."

Penny and Quentin waited in silence on the other side of the truck until Alice was done. When the truck sped away and she was still in one piece, Quentin sighed as if he had been holding his breath the whole time. When Alice was back to keeping walking pace with them again, Quentin asked, "So what did he say?"

"He asked me out."

Penny felt an unexpected sinking in his stomach, while Quentin immediately countered, "What?! But he's a sicko!"

"I said yes."

"What?!" Quentin nearly shrieked, while Penny shifted as his stomach twisted further.

Alice kept her eyes on the ground and said nothing further, so Quentin continued, "Look, Alice, if you're trying to do this to help me out, it is so not worth going out on a date with a creature like Acker."

"It's not because of you, Quentin. He's been a thorn in our sides since we started here. If I don't go, he'll make things ten times worse on all of us. If I go out on a single date, then he can't say

that I didn't give him a chance."

She brought up a good point. Acker had been the source of aggravation all four years since he was good friends with Eliot. Still, Penny felt she was really doing it more for Quentin's sake than anyone. Quentin just nodded that he believed Alice as he said, "Well, I guess you're right."

Penny always went to his favorite place when they got home. Dr. Thorough had a huge area of farmland around his house, and there was an old beat up truck, rusted and lost with time, far enough away from the house for privacy, but still close enough to see what was going on. Penny spent most of his time there, to avoid anyone trying to bother him in the afternoon and evening time. Quentin usually went off to do his own thing, while Alice went inside to get started on her homework or to clean up around the house. She walked in the door and found Eliot seated on the couch with his boyfriend Dane leaning against him, both of them watching TV. Dane had long reddish brown hair and blue eyes that normally gave off a cold stare, especially when Alice was in the room. As she passed them, she felt Dane's eyes on her, giving her a penetrating and vile look, but she ignored it, instead putting Quentin's backpack on the table.

Eliot spoke to Alice from over his shoulder, saying, "Hey, if you see Penny, tell him Dr. Thorough wants him on dish duty."

Alice wandered over to the bookcase to Eliot's right, placing her books in it while she responded to him, "You can tell him yourself. You know where he is."

"You know he doesn't talk to me!" Eliot argued.

"He doesn't talk to anyone, El. You shouldn't take it personally," Alice started.

"Seems like he won't talk to them unless he's forced," Eliot surmised quietly to himself.

"He can hear your thoughts, you know. You should think what you would like to say to him and he will be able to hear you. He doesn't talk because he doesn't need to, not because he's trying to hurt anyone's feelings," Alice said.

"He's my brother from another mother. He should be able to talk to me," Eliot replied, ignoring what Alice had said.

Alice began to walk away, hearing Dane say to her before she was out of the room, "He talks to you."

She stopped and turned to look at the cold blue eyes staring back at her. Dane smiled simply, as if to keep the sting of her words there. Eliot added to the statement, "Yeah, he talks to you. That means you can tell him that he has dish duty."

Alice walked out of the room and back outside, where she made her way through the overgrown trees, bushes and vines to the old truck where Penny would be. He was seated in the driver's side, where the steering wheel was long gone, but a small TV had been put in its place. He had managed to use an extension cord and a cable to hook up his own entertainment while he was outside. She opened the rusted

passenger side door and stepped into the truck, using all her strength to close it, again.

There was a space of silence where Alice was watching the little TV. Penny never understood why she took such an interest in him, as if she didn't want him to be alone. She was the only person that bothered to talk to him, whether he responded or not. There were a lot of things that only she did.

"So I talked to Mr. Struthers today. He said that you were behind on your Math homework but I asked him to give you at least four more days to make it up if I tutored you. If you want me to, I will, but I think you already know the answers. If you don't turn in your work, he's going to assume that I didn't help you and he says I'll have two days of detention with him after school."

He knew she couldn't, but it was as if she really could read his mind. He did know the answers, but he hated Mr. Struthers and purposefully didn't turn in his work. She also knew that he wouldn't want her to be in detention, because that would mean she wouldn't be there to walk Quentin home after school. She went on, "Don't worry about Acker, either. I already have everything planned. I'm going to the pizza place on Main street with him, then I'll tell him Dr. Thorough wants me home. I'll talk to the doctor and make sure that, even if Acker has the brains to call and verify, which I know he doesn't, Thorough will say the same thing and he'll bring me home. No kisses at the door or any of that, Quentin will surely be outside waiting to make sure that I'm still alive. I'll be shifty so Acker can't find a moment to lay one on me."

She was uncanny about mapping out exactly what people would do in various situations. Penny didn't know how she did it so well without using magic. Moving on, she said to him, "I would like my journal back, now."

She looked at him and waited. The small green book that Penny had picked up after school was Alice's journal. He had noticed what it was shortly after they came home. He pulled it out of his bag by his side and handed it to her. She took it easily, then she said, "I know you've probably already read it. I've seen you put your hand on a book and its like the words absorb into your mind. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and I'll assume you absorbed the words, therefore reading its content by accident because of your power."

Again, she knew exactly what was happening. He hadn't realized that she had seen him absorb the words from books, before. It was a newly discovered addition to his power, and he had only been able to do it when he wasn't concentrating on keeping the voices out of his head. She was right though, he had absorbed the words of her journal. It was technically accidental. He had seen that it was her journal, and merely by thinking that he wanted to know what was inside, he had absorbed the words without much difficulty or without the ability to stop himself. Still, he knew he probably would've done it with intention. She opened the door and began to leave, saying, "I don't care that you know what's inside of it. I just don't want anyone else to know. I trust that you won't let anything slip about my private thoughts. If they ever did, I would know about it."

He felt that what she was saying was not only a statement of fact,

but a warning. She got out of the truck and closed the door, saying through the broken window, "Dr. Thorough wants you to do dishes tonight. See you, later."

While walking back toward the house, Alice was sure that she heard Penny's voice call out to her, "Later!"

She didn't look back to see for sure.

2. Stage 2

****Stage 2****

Penny sorted through the last of his homework for the night and sat down at the old brown desk against the far wall of his room. It was cluttered with papers, which made his sorting look a little redundant. He was usually more organized by nature, but he shared his room with Quentin, who was the exact opposite, and his efforts to clean were met with more clutter before too long.

It was nightfall, late but Penny didn't know what time exactly, and Quentin was already asleep in his own bed across the opposite wall. He was lying on his stomach with one arm hanging down almost to the floor; his cape a tangled mess around his head. Quentin's blue comforter was wrapped around his legs, a section of it stuck halfway out the window just above his bed. How that happened, Penny had no idea. Penny's own bed was just beside the desk. It was still neatly made.

After casting a glance at Quentin to make sure he wasn't choking from the cape still around his neck, Penny returned his attention to the desk, pushing off more papers and allowing them to fall to the floor to make some space.

He had managed to find a blank page and he was searching through the clutter for his science book when he heard rustling just behind him. Penny turned around and whispered, "Q?"

The volume of Penny's voice was barely audible due to lack of use. He had almost forgotten to use more air when he spoke so that others could hear him. Still asleep in bed, Quentin showed no sign he was troubled. Penny became confused when the rustling continued until he realized it was right outside of his door. He could hear no thoughts included with the noise, but it didn't seem threatening enough to raise his concern. He got up and went to the door to listen. The rustling continued, now a little louder, as if someone were walking back down the hallway. Penny opened it slowly, then he turned his gaze to the floor, not looking ahead of him as he stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

He found himself in darkness, surrounded by clothing. He sensed he was in a closet, and his mind panicked as he tried to piece together why he wasn't in the familiar hallway where he should be. He could smell gun powder and cigarettes, but he could see nothing save for a small sliver of light underneath the frame of a new door in front of him. He collapsed against the wall, realizing the door he came through was now gone. He slowly slid down to the floor. He started breathing heavily, the fear paralyzing him like a small, internal explosion that refused to allow him to fathom what he was

seeing.

His body felt small and cold, like a child.

Suddenly, the door in front of him opened. He heard himself gasp, but no words came out. He was totally unable to speak. A large male figure appeared in the doorway, carrying what looked like a Winchester rifle in his left hand. A red baseball cap clouded his features and his shirt was stained with dark blood and something black like motor oil. The man reached out his right hand and shouted angrily, "HERE!"

Penny woke up with a start. He gasped so strongly for air, his eyes temporarily went bleary. It took him several minutes to realize that he was still in his bed, and the sunlit room told him it was the early morning hours. He finally had the courage to glance over. Penny was relieved to see Quentin asleep, snoring lightly, strangely in the same position Penny had observed him in during the night. He pulled his covers off and sat at the edge of the bed, trying to forget the vivid dream he just had, if he could even call it that. Penny's upper body was caked in sweat, his white t-shirt nearly soaked through, revealing several light scars on his chest and two deeper ones near his ribs. He pulled off his shirt and uncovered a gray shirt just beside the desk. He stared at the desk a moment, trying to recollect when he had actually gone to bed. The clutter gave him no clues, and he began to wonder if all the organizing at the desk the night before had also been part of the dream.

He pushed the dream out of his mind and waited in the silence, debating if he should go back to sleep or just stay up, when he heard the faint voice of a woman drifting into his mind.

"_Divine._"

He looked up toward the ceiling, instantly recognizing the voice as Alice. Her bedroom was in the attic just above his own, but even being so close, it was rare that he picked up on her thoughts while she dreamed. Again, he heard the voice of her internal thoughts whisper as if to answer someone, "_Divine._"

Although he respected her privacy more than anyone else, Penny couldn't help his incessant need to research her thoughts further. All of his life, his abilities were a way to discover all there was to know about everyone in his life, even complete strangers if he wanted to. It was not a pleasant experience, knowing the horrible thoughts that some people came up with about themselves or others. Penny was also aware of secrets, and the danger that it put him in when others would stop at nothing to hide those secrets.

Alice was the only person he had very few ideas about, even after he had absorbed the contents of her journal. It had described various fantasies, goals, dreams and memories she held dear, but it could not hold her consciousness. He could never get her out of his mind, his need to find more was never satisfied, and as her mind whispered this open thought while she slept, it beckoned him to come and find her.

He walked quietly out of his room, still following the trail of thoughts but only hearing, "_Divine_" over and over, again. He crept up the stairs so softly, he barely heard his own footsteps until he

was at the door to her room. When he opened the door, he found himself in semi-darkness because there were no windows, but he could easily see the frame of Alice's bed through the tiny strands of light just creeping in from the hallway. Penny didn't need to concentrate as he went to her bed and lay down beside her. He watched Alice's eyes move swiftly beneath their lids in a state of dreaming, her breasts rising and falling under her white night dress while she breathed irregularly, as if she were struggling with something.

Attempting to listen to her thoughts on his own, he could still only hear the same word, so Penny did something he never had to do with anyone else. He placed his hand on Alice's head, physically touching her to try and absorb what was happening.

Her unconscious mind brought him into her world of dreams, a place he had not ventured with her, before. He found himself surrounded by a foggy white light that made it hard to see more than a few feet ahead of him. Penny was surprised by the sense of nausea he felt trying to navigate someone else's dream. It was like being strapped to a merry-go-round spinning upside down very high up in the air. There were people walking past him, at first too fast for him to recognize, then they began to move more slowly. He could determine based on their costumes and styles that they were some kind of circus performers, all waiting with their gaze centered somewhere in the fog, as if they were preparing to begin their show.

Penny observed these people more closely, trying to understand what they were waiting for. He felt as if this dream was part of a memory, and that some of these people were real while others were part of the symbolism that made up night stories. It seemed like more and more time had passed before he finally saw Alice's face in the white fog.

The performers were passing her without a second look. No one seemed interested in the teenage girl seated on the ground, heavy iron shackles restricting her ankles so she could not go far. She was wearing a beautiful white dress, sparkling in the light of an invisible sun. Alice's face was pure white with rosy cheeks made from powdered makeup, her hair curled and placed around her head in trails, making her look like a living doll. As Penny stepped closer to her, he found that the air around her was becoming more exotic. Alice was staring down seductively at a pool of water near her feet, drawing her finger through it as if she were waiting for something to come out.

Penny stopped just beside her and watched her carefully. He could feel a strong pull towards her, an irresistible need to take her in his arms and act out some of the fantasies he had formerly only pictured in his dreams. He could see these fantasies playing swiftly through his own mind's eye while he watched her, but the fantasies were changed now, more brilliant in definition, as if they had already happened. Penny began to realize only as they had already passed through his mind that somehow Alice was blending her own fantasies with his. It showed him that she had been fantasizing about similar things, and almost as much as he was. As the fantasies finished playing in his mind, Penny wondered for a moment if Alice could see what he was seeing. As if she had heard the question in his mind, she looked up at him.

Her eyes were like a vixen, set in a stare of innocence mixed with a sense of deep passion. He had never seen her like this while awake, and it startled him to think that she not only knew his fantasies now, but she was tempting him while asleep. He looked away, feeling his heart dropping, his desire for her revealed unintentionally. No one had ever been able to meld their thoughts with his, much less see what he kept hidden. He heard her voice ask him something, but it was so vague, he had to turn and look at her, again. She was standing now, holding out her arms to him, now looking more like herself. She spoke again, this time a little more loudly, _"Do you know me?"_

The pulling sensation returned, but this time it was so strong, he could not fight it. Penny stepped toward her and pulled her to him, bringing his lips to hers in a passionate embrace.

He opened his eyes, but did not pull away until he realized that he was kissing Alice in waking life, just like in the dream. She was kissing him back, also awake now. Her eyes widened as she seemed to realize at the same time he did what was happening. Penny didn't immediately move away from her, and for a moment, their eyes met while their lips were still holding fast. Penny could no longer hear Alice's thoughts, but he could confirm from her gaze that she had seen what he had seen, including the fantasies he had wanted to keep private.

Alice suddenly pulled away and jabbed his side with her right hand. He let out a surprised yelp as she shouted, "How could you?!"

Startled, Penny nearly fell backwards out of her bed. He turned his back on her, but he could still feel the punches of her fists while she drummed his spine and yelled, "You spied on me! You spied on my dreams! You can't do that!"

When he was far enough away from her to stop feeling the jabs, Penny glanced back at her for a second. He saw only fury in her eyes, and it stung his insides worse than her fists. He mumbled quickly, "I'm sorry," and left the room without looking back.

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><p>"Fish should be banned from this school."

Quentin made this statement as soon as he sat down on the thick green grass of the school yard next to Alice. On his tray was pink and shriveled looking piece of said fish and an orange, the only two things he had chosen to eat that day. Alice frowned in disapproval of Quentin's sparse meal, her hands busily working to split up a sandwich she had brought from home to fill it with meat and cheese. Penny was seated just across from them, his head resting in his arms on the nearby picnic table. Since this morning, he had not looked at Alice once. He was hoping that something would happen to erase the morning's events so she wouldn't hate him, forever. She hadn't noticed him when he sat down with them, which may have been a good sign because she hadn't yet told him to leave. His mood was still less enlightened by the fact that he hated lunch time because the weird thoughts and disgusting noises people made while eating were never attractive enough to allow him much of an appetite.

"You're being too dramatic, Quentin. The fish is fine," Alice argued while she worked on her sandwich.

"I'm not being dramatic! I could **die** from this thing! It's probably not even real meat, it looks like plastic!"

Alice began pulling her sandwich in half, and Penny watched her pointedly, making sure not to make eye contact. She wasn't making any point to look at him, but instead remained immersed in Quentin's fish dilemma. She quickly handed one half of her sandwich to Penny, still not looking at him, and took a bite of her own half. Penny didn't move to take it. He concentrated harder, trying to hear even one thought as to if this sandwich were a peace offering or just a familiar ritual that Alice wasn't aware she was doing. When he came up with nothing, his theory of a peace offering deflated. Alice didn't seem to notice Penny's internal conflicts as she continued to argue with Quentin, "It's not plastic, Q! They can't serve food-less food in a school! I'm sure it's against the rules and the parents would go ballistic all over the internet if it was!"

Penny felt a sense of hope develop once more when he realized that Alice, usually great at debating any subject, was not focusing well with this seemingly easy argument. It could be a sign she was more distracted than Penny thought. Smirking a little, Penny sat up and took the sandwich, but instead of eating it, he put it back in Alice's lunch bag. She didn't look at it or Penny but kept her eyes on Quentin as he continued complaining, "Look at that! There isn't even a bone in there!"

Penny sat down back at the picnic table and watched. Alice was glaring at Quentin with frustration. She turned her head to check her lunch bag and saw the other half of the sandwich. Alice still didn't look at Penny as she grabbed the other half from her lunch bag and tried to hand it back to him while she shouted at Quentin, "Of course there's a bone! It's right there!"

Penny continued to tease Alice, taking the sandwich from her and immediately placing it back in her lunch bag. Quentin showed no end in sight to his convictions as he countered, "This bone looks like it was taken off of a fish thirteen years ago and glued onto this piece of plastic!"

Finally, Alice looked at Penny. She took the other half of the sandwich from her bag, then she got up and put it firmly in his hand. Penny was looking down at the sandwich when he felt her eyes on him, so he looked up to meet her. He realized that Alice was not looking at him, but just past him, her expression angry. He turned to see what direction she was gazing upon and saw what was making her fume. About twenty feet ahead of them, a younger and less athletic looking boy was being pushed down by a very large, burly looking older boy. While the younger boy endured the bullying, Penny's mind was flooded with the thoughts of the other students standing by. Some thoughts were pro-violence and others were against, but no one was thinking of stepping between the boys. It was a common issue Penny had noticed with people in general, whether they had special abilities or not.

Alice got up before Penny had turned to look back at her. She took off running full force toward the much larger bully just as he had

picked up the younger boy and thrown him hard against the ground. The older boy didn't see her coming as Alice leaped off the ground and bounded off of a nearby picnic table, slamming as forcefully into this guy as she could without crushing both of their bones. He was forced to the ground by her intensely fast movements. Her feet hit the ground with so much momentum, she had to spin around and allow the dirt and grass to kick up around her before she had slowed herself enough to stop without twisting her ankles out of joint.

She walked over to the bully and stated angrily, "We do not tolerate bullies in this school!"

Alice was quickly catching the attention of more students. Penny could hear their thoughts beginning to center on her. Unfortunately, the bully was getting up, and he towered over her once he was fully upright. His thoughts were darker than the people around him. Penny could openly hear the man thinking, _"This bitch is going down deep in the dirt."_

Penny started to get up, but the bully was already conjuring a spell. A bright blue light shined from his palms. The light flowed like liquid and grew larger as the bully aimed it at Alice. Her eyes widened, but she didn't have enough time to react as the bully tossed the blue light into the air and it began making its way blindingly fast towards her. Alice started running to get out of harm's way, matching the light's speed just a split second faster. Alice was like a blur to the eyes of Penny and the other students as she tried her best to softly push aside anyone that was in the path of the light. Acker happened to be one of them, and Alice managed to move him to the ground before the blue light flew past them and slammed into the West wall of the school, dusting the bricks that were impacted by it.

Penny was struck short for a second when he found Alice lying on top of Acker's well endowed frame, her eyes looking into his like they were about to embrace. Penny knew that it wasn't like that, but their position made a knot of jealousy form in his stomach. His second of thoughtless judgment had cost him, because it was enough time for the bully to react. He shoved some nearby students to the ground, punching some and heaving others out of his way, while Acker got up and helped Penny off the ground. Her red running shoes had become a stringy mess of foam and rubber because of her speed the first time, something they always became when she ran at higher speeds. Her feet were also now battered and a little bloody from the lack of anything to protect her from her speed, and there was no way she could run away this time without severely injuring herself.

Alice bounced out of her battered shoes and walked back to the bully, ignoring Acker's screams for the fight to stop. Alice was not going as fast as before, but she was still agile enough to hop up on one of the lunch tables, her battered feet wobbling as she did so. Alice had nothing left if the bully tried his power again, and none of the students were willing to stop him. Penny watched as the bully began to form the light in his hands once more. The bully was staring at Alice with intent. He didn't seem to care about the consequences of hurting her.

As if from nowhere, Eliot stepped up from behind the bully and placed his hand on the bully's shoulder. Eliot sent out an electrical pulse just strong enough to render the bully unconscious. Jerking

uncontrollably from the shock, the bully's eyes went blank and Eliot let go of him, allowing the bully to collapse on the ground. What Eliot hadn't noticed was the ball of light that was still forming in the bully's hands, now without a mind to direct it. The light flew from the bully's hand as soon as he was on the ground, spiraling out at an odd direction. It was so fast, Penny had only a fraction of a second to see the light was going to hit Alice.

She closed her eyes and took in a shrill breath, bracing for the worst.

But it never came.

Alice slowly opened her eyes. She saw the shocked expression on Eliot's face and the other students in front of her. Their features were oddly marred by a strange blue light flowing just beyond her nose. She realized in her own sense of shock that somehow, the light shield that had come from the bully was being held in place in mid-air. She turned and looked in the only direction she felt the power could be coming from, and she saw Penny standing there, both arms out with his index and middle fingers together on each hand. His eyes were concentrating at the blue light, keeping it in place through his own thoughts.

Alice didn't have much time to gather herself before school teachers arrived to handle the situation. They had been alerted by Quentin, who had missed most of the scene when he took off for help. Quentin nearly fell to his knees once he saw the blue light in front of Alice's face. Eliot had made his way over to one side of the light and held out his arms for Alice, whispering, "Come on out of the way."

Obeying him, Alice moved carefully away from the light, her eyes never looking away from Penny. She allowed Eliot to take her in his outstretched arms, and he carried her from the lunch table just as Penny let go of the light and it skyrocketed through the place where Alice had once been standing. It shot up into the sky and out of sight. Eliot did not put Alice down, but instead carried her to Principal Fogg, who was now standing next to the bully. Fogg looked at them and asked sternly, "What is going on here?"

"I need to take Alice to the nurse's office, Principal Fogg," Eliot replied.

Principal Fogg glanced down at Alice's feet and observed the damage. He nodded and responded more kindly, "Please, Eliot, go right ahead."

Still in a state of shock, Alice only glanced at Penny briefly as they passed. Penny's eyes watched Alice as she passed, but he found himself focusing more on Eliot as he carried Alice back inside the school.

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><p>"You don't have to go if you don't want to."<p>

Dr. Thorough was handsome for a middle aged man, or at least that's

what Penny had heard Quentin think when the doctor had given him a set of paints last Christmas. John Thorough was a fairly attractive man, but had only been married to his work his whole life. He had lots of lines around the corners of his eyes and mouth, and his once jet black hair was always shaded with lines of gray. Penny had been living in John's home nearly his whole life, and yet the doctor never aged much in all those years, nor did he ever become burdened by caring for many foster children. Even now, while Alice sat in the passenger seat with her feet bandaged, and Penny sat in the back seat of the truck with a pink slip in his hand stating he would have to speak to the Principal Fogg tomorrow, the doctor continued to have a light hearted smile and an easy going attitude. Thorough was all smiles as he attempted to call off the date Alice had set with Acker previously, a date that was supposed to take place tonight.

She argued with him more fiercely than was probably needed, "John, if I don't go then everyone will be gossiping about me at school, tomorrow! They'll say that I'm really badly injured and I'll never recover or some other kind of stupid crap!"

With her arms folded, Alice stared out the window of the truck. Quentin was seated next to Penny, eagerly listening to the argument going on but not putting in his own two cents about it like he usually did. John continued, "I could call and tell Acker that I had you stay home for another reason. Then maybe he will tell his buddies it was because of your mean old indecent excuse for a father figure trying to keep you two apart."

Although John had tried to be a paternal figure for years, none of them really felt he was their father. He had not adopted them legally, instead allowing them to remain independent members of his home, but Penny always felt that John had the closest bond with Alice, one that made him more like a father to her than anyone else. She had been with John the longest out of everyone, brought to his doorstep when she was barely a toddler.

"The girls won't listen to what he says, though! They'll just talk about it and ask questions all day! Do you know how hard it is to be interrogated when you're just trying to get your gym clothes on?!"

Quentin stifled a laugh, and Alice looked back to glare at him before returning turning back to look out the window, again. John sighed as if he had been defeated, although Penny could hear John's distinct thoughts that he was allowing Alice to win, knowing he could not change her mind. John answered a little sadly, "Very well, I suppose we'll all be home if you need to call and have us pick you up for any reason."

Alice didn't respond to his words, instead keeping her gaze focused on the road. Once they were home, she had gone upstairs and prepared for her night out. Penny was outside as always, seated in the back of the old pickup a distance from the house. He was still there when Alice came out later in the evening. She was a little hard to see from that distance, but Penny's vision was good enough to notice that she was wearing the same navy blue dress she wore during the Fourth of July party last year. It was his favorite dress on her. Her hair was tied back and she wore a pair of dress shoes over her bandaged feet, walking toward Acker's big black truck as soon as he pulled up.

When they were gone, Penny pondered about Alice in silence for a long time. He remembered that he was making something for her in his room, something that he had worked on since her birthday two years before, when she had made mention she wanted one just like it. He had been meaning to give it to her on a special day this year, missing her birthday yet again because of the detail going into such a hand made project, but he had not found a day that felt right. He wondered, being so close to finishing, if he should give it to her today, but he retracted this thought, knowing that he would come across as smug if he gave it to her on the day he saved her life, as if she were lucky to have him around.

"Hey," came a voice that took Penny from his thoughts.

It was Eliot, walking toward the truck in a nonchalant stride. Penny had never expected him to come out there, especially in the evenings when Eliot was normally feeling up or taking out his boyfriend, Dane. Once he was by the truck, Eliot placed his hands on the edge in a thoughtful fashion, then he asked, "Do you have five dollars?"

Instantly, Penny's confusion about Eliot's appearance subsided. Eliot normally came to him when he needed money. Shaking his head, Penny looked away, hoping Eliot would just leave and not ask him, again. Eliot continued undeterred, saying, "Don't screw this up for her."

Penny brought his gaze up to meet Eliot's, confused. Then he saw an image of Alice flashing in Eliot's mind. It was an old memory of her laughing at a joke Eliot had made during dinner one night, a memory that Eliot used often when he was thinking of her. Eliot looked away from Penny and continued, "I know what you're like, Penny. I know how you think. You've always had a thing going on for Alice but it's not going to happen."

Anger rose in Penny so quickly, he worried that Eliot would see it and confirm he was right. Whatever he saw, Eliot ignored it and continued, "If she pairs up with you, she has no future. She'll be stuck in this town probably forever, and you'll never be able to speak up for her. If she goes with Acker, she'll have a future, a big house, a career, a husband that can take care of her, and if they're lucky, some kids to show for it."

Backing off of the side of the truck, Eliot walked away, glancing back at Penny with the knowledge that he had made his point. He put up his hand to wave a half-hearted good-bye and stated, "I mean it."

Penny could not have been more furious. He got out of the back of the truck once Eliot was gone and proceeded to the nearby broken down barn far away from the house, where Penny spent a majority of his time moving boulders with his mind and studying his abilities in private. He was so enraged, his mentality was seeping down his shoulders and arms and into his hands. Penny could feel the pressure building within his palms until it was too hard to hold it in. He tossed his hands forward as if he were pushing away an obstacle, and a huge surge of clear waves projected from his palms, slamming into the boulders around the shed and cracking them open.

He did this several times, feeling much better each time he did so, until he heard Quentin's voice shouting from somewhere nearby, "Penny? Penny, where are you?!"

Quietly exiting the old shed, Penny wandered back to the house. He found Quentin waiting by the old pickup, a small two-way receiver in his hand. Once Penny was close enough to see, Quentin held up the receiver and told him in an excited but hushed tone, "I think we can listen to Alice's date with this."

Penny was confused, so Quentin explained, "I figured out a way to use your ability to make this receiver cooperate with the receiver I placed in the folds of her purse even at such a long distance. You may have to concentrate, but we can hear if Acker is being a shit-face or not."

Penny couldn't help but laugh whenever Quentin cursed. It was infrequent but Penny usually agreed with what was said. They climbed into the pickup and Quentin handed Penny the receiver. Quentin pointed at the receiver and said, "Just think about the other receiver, and act as if you are listening to people's voices through the speaker instead of their thoughts."

Penny had spent a lifetime focusing on thoughts, but he had never figured to focus on spoken words. He had to give Quentin credit for the unique idea. Penny held the receiver in his hands while he thought about Acker and Alice's voices, picturing what they would sound like. Sure enough, the receiver began projecting words through its speaker as if it were on an open channel. The voices were forming like they were underwater, but as Penny continued to concentrate, he used his will to amplify it just enough to make out the words. They both leaned in and listened, intently.

Penny knew that Alice would be furious if she found out what they were doing. Knowing her, she would know something was up the minute she came home. Penny's continuously growing need to know more about her innermost thoughts was teetering on the edge of absurdity, to the point where he was using his abilities to eavesdrop on her date. When Penny thought about how desperate he was becoming, he explained it away as Quentin's idea to begin with. Penny had wished no wrong doing tonight. Surely, Alice would acknowledge that if she found out.

Right.

"...believe what you did to that guy today," Acker's voice said more clearly through the receiver.

It was harder to hear them because of the background noise. Penny distinctly heard a pan drop on a table in the distance, and he knew they were at Kelvin's Pizza Place on 5th street. It was one of Alice's favorite places to go. Her voice trailed back to Acker, "It may have been a little stupid of me, but I just hate bullies."

"Yeah, I've noticed. I tease Quentin all the time, though. Would you kick me into the ground for that?" Acker asked.

"I don't like that you tease Quentin, but at least you aren't physical about it. If you were, your head would be stuck in the soil

where I stomped on it."

Acker laughed, then continued, "So what's your deal anyway? You really don't like bullies because you want to protect the weak ones, or is there something else there?"

Quentin leaned in even further, his doe-eyes clearly visible and his nostrils breathing heavily onto the receiver. Penny would've shoved him away, but his concentration was too centered on listening to what Alice would say next.

"Well, I never told anyone, but I remember being teased as a kid. The other girls in school used to call me Malice because I didn't get along with them. They would tell me, 'Alice is full of Malice! Alice is full of Malice! Watch out for Alice!'"

Penny expected laughter to come from Acker, but it didn't form into the receiver. Instead, Acker responded with, "That's terrible. I guess people remember when someone teases them. I can't say I've been the better man about it, but my father told me when I was growing up that I needed to be strong and that I needed to work hard, and when I see Quentin, my father just comes out, and I want him to be strong and work harder at being a man like my father told me to be."

Penny glanced at Quentin noticed a distinct change. Quentin's eyes were glazed over with tears, but his face showed signs of resentment, maybe even hatred. Penny lost his concentration for a moment and the receiver began giving out. Quentin shouted angrily, "Wait! I want to hear the rest!"

Concentrating again, Penny got the receiver to bring back the voices, "...Penny secretly dating?"

It was Acker's voice, and obviously he had asked Alice about Penny. He didn't glance at Quentin this time, but Penny could feel Quentin's eyes on him. Penny concentrated harder, and the voices became more clear. Alice asked a question of her own, "Why would you say that?"

"Because you blushed when I said his name, earlier," Acker answered.

There was a short pause, then Alice said, "We're not dating. You're actually the first person to ask me that. I don't think anyone pays much attention to Penny and I when we're at school."

"Well, I don't see the two of you as much as school as I do when I come by the house to pick up Eliot. You're always in that old beat up truck talking to Penny. Eliot says Penny only talks to you, basically, so I just thought there was something there," Acker said.

Penny concentrated more intensely, imagining himself standing right there in the room. Alice replied quietly to Acker, "If there is something, he hasn't brought it up."

The speaker cut off. Quentin glanced up at Penny and asked, "Why'd you do that?"

Putting his hand up to his head, Penny muttered quickly, "It's making

my head hurt too much."

"Oh. Right. Okay, well, I guess we know at least some of what's going on, and she isn't dead yet, so that's a good sign. She should be coming home soon, I'm going to wait for her."

Quentin took the receiver and shoved it in the pocket of his jeans, then he took off for the driveway. Penny took his hand away from his head, glad that Quentin didn't question the pain. It was coming from Penny's heart, not his head.

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><p>Acker's headlights came in through the windows about an hour, later. Penny was already in his t-shirt and sleeping pants, lying down in his bed when he caught sight of the lights dancing off of his ceiling. Penny got up and went to the window by Quentin's bed. He saw Alice step out only moments before Quentin ran up and hugged her close. Eliot was also outside, and he said something to Acker before the black truck reversed and pulled away into the night.<p>

Apparently, Acker had not been allowed to give Alice a good night kiss before she was accompanied back into the house. Score one for Quentin.

Penny went back to bed and pretended to be sleeping comfortably. Quentin and Alice came into the room and Penny slowly opened his eyes like he had just heard them. Alice looked at him and smiled. Penny smiled back, but his smile faded when he saw Eliot appear in the doorway. Alice sat down on Quentin's bed while Quentin reached under a pile of clutter nearby and pulled out a big box. He handed it to her and said, "We got this for you."

"Aw, you guys didn't need to do that," Alice said, opening the package while she did so.

A short wave of panic hit Penny. He didn't know about this package at all. How could he not know they were planning a gift for her? Alice opened it up quickly, pulling the brown wrapping paper away and lifting the top of the box to reveal a pair of pink and silver running shoes. She held them close to her, letting the box drop to the floor as she smiled again and said, "Oh, thank you!"

She looked at Quentin, then Penny, and then Eliot with her thankful smile, but Eliot responded dryly, "Penny was being too cheap today. He didn't loan me money to help pay for it when I asked him to, so Quentin and I are responsible for the gift."

Penny gave Eliot a hard glare. So that was what he wanted money for. Of course he neglected to mention it was for a gift for Alice. Eliot didn't even bother to look at him, but instead kept his eyes on Alice. She remained positive, "To me it's still a gift from everybody."

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><p>After Alice and Eliot left, Penny pretended to be sleeping himself until Quentin was out, which didn't take long. Once the lights were turned out around the house and Penny could hear the thoughts of the others in a dream state, he reached under his bed and pulled out the box that contained the project he had been working on for two years. He carried it very quietly up the stairs to Alice's room, hoping she was still awake. She was normally a night person, doing homework or other things in her room until the late hours. Sure enough, when he turned the knob and quietly opened the door just a crack, he heard her voice whisper, "Come in, Penny."<p>

He wandered into the room, noticing that it was very dark, save for a tiny blue lamp on Alice's bedside table. She was already under the covers and ready for sleep. She smiled with a sense of knowing on her face when he held a small yellow box out in front of him. She whispered sweetly, "You didn't have to get me anything. I don't care what Eliot said, he was just trying to make you feel bad."

"I wanted to," he whispered, sitting down next to her on the bed before handing over the box.

She took it from him very carefully, as if it were a sacred object, then she carefully lifted the lid. Inside was a tiny wooden box with beautiful hand-made carvings, painted with a cherry stain. Alice lifted the wooden box out, then opened up the top of it to reveal that it was a jewelry box lined with pink felt, and a tiny figure of a fairy with a tiny wand popped straight up inside the box once the lid was opened. What made her unique was that her clothing was painted like Alice's favorite navy blue dress, and the fairy's shoes were painted carefully to look like a pair of red running shoes.

It was a jewelry box with Alice as the central figure.

She gasped in awe and looked up at Penny, her eyes brimming with tears. He couldn't help but look away from her as he said quickly, "I painted her. I fixed up the box and carved it too. I wanted to give it to you for your birthday. Sorry that it couldn't wait."

Closing the box and placing it carefully on the bedside table, Alice sat up on her knees and put her hands on Penny's cheeks, moving his strong jaw toward her until his eyes could not look away from hers. Alice leaned in and kissed him for what felt like a very long time. When she pulled away, he told him through her soft tears, "I love it so much. Thank you."

3. Stage 3

Stage 3

"Rapture!"

Alice nearly spit out her cereal from being startled. Quentin rose up from his seat across from her, his arms out, his eyes wide, a short essay on the table in front of him. He was reading it out loud for dramatic effect, but Alice had not been paying attention until that moment. It was another usual morning before school, Eliot seated at the far corner munching his breakfast cereal while Penny idly watched his own, taking a few bites even though he didn't feel very hungry.

Penny was especially taunt today, after receiving the pink slip yesterday that told him he would have to speak to the principal before lunch.

Quentin stood up on the bench next to the kitchen table, reaching his hands to the sky as he continued in a booming voice, "The beasts of men shall be called, and we shall triumph! Glorious!"

Alice glanced at the essay in front of Quentin and asked, "Does it really say that in your paper?"

Quentin let his arms go limp. He began to sit back down, saying, "No, I just did that for effect."

"It was good though," Alice replied, still trying to read the essay upside down.

Eliot was watching Alice while he finished up his cereal, and Penny noticed a subtle change in his thoughts. Usually Eliot's mind was one tracked or full of self-loathing. At this moment, he was thinking of asking Alice something. Before Penny could discern what it was, Eliot said, "Alice, Acker is coming to pick me up today. You want to ride with us?"

He didn't mention it, but Penny could tell from Eliot's thoughts following this statement that he meant only Alice could have a ride, and no one else was invited. Eliot didn't look at him, but it was more obvious he knew Penny was reading his mind when a picture came into his head of Alice and Acker holding hands, a picture of a possible future memory. Penny felt rage build within him, but he was more concerned as to Alice's response. She had gotten up to put her plate in the sink when she responded, "Dane told me he was picking you up, today. If you forget and go with Acker again, he said he's going to break up with you."

Eliot's face dropped, and his thoughts went blank. Penny could tell he was put off by this statement, and he smiled a little. Quentin was restating his essay, calling out once more, "Rapture!"

"Shut up, Q! We already know what your stupid essay will say!" Eliot shouted, venting his frustration on the nearest bystander.

Quentin deflated, his body hunching down as he sat back in his seat. Alice didn't take this lightly, coming up to Eliot and stating, "Don't you pick on him just because you're whipped!"

Penny stifled a laugh, as did Quentin. Eliot became even more angry, shouting back, "Hey, just because he's a simpleton doesn't mean you need to be Miss Defense whenever someone makes a statement to his face!"

Not looking at Quentin, Penny caught glimpses of the thoughts of hurt that trailed through his mind. Eliot began to walk out to the living room, but Alice wasn't finished. She began bouncing on the balls of her feet, saying, "What was that, Short-Circuit Boy?"

Eliot stopped in the living room, still visible through the kitchen. He turned to glare at her, saying, "Don't you start with the names, Alice!"

She put out her hands as if to welcome the fight, replying, "Come and make me, _Outlet_!"

Eliot came back into the kitchen, but she was ready for him. Alice only needed a short burst of steps to push off the ground and into Eliot's chest, pushing him against the wall of the kitchen. Quentin got up and moved aside, even though he was far enough from the danger. Penny just watched while Eliot flipped Alice upside down and pinned her legs around his left shoulder so she couldn't kick him again, then he released a set of small static sparks through her clothing and into her skin. Her hair began to stand on end, and she shouted angrily, "Stop it, _Sparky_, or you will feel my wrath!"

"Can't hear you!" Eliot shouted back, and he began spinning Alice around the kitchen while she was still upside down.

She was calling out while she spun, fighting against Eliot to get out of his reach, but her small figure was no match. Quentin by this time was attempting to help, reaching up to Eliot's arms to pull them off of Alice, but he was failing miserably. Penny could only stand by and watch until Dr. John Thorough came down the back stairs, calling out, "What's going on in here?"

Eliot put Alice down quickly, her hair still a stiffened mess from the static he produced. She was unsteady from all the spinning. She acted passive as John came through the door. He gave Alice a once-over and lifted an eyebrow, then tried to remain more calm as he said, "That's a very interesting choice in hairstyle."

"I'm going for the just-made-out-in-a-corner look," Alice replied dryly, running her hand along her hair, which only seemed to make it stand out more.

Dr. Thorough didn't seem to catch the joke, and Penny could read in his mind that he was wondering if this were a new fashion statement at school, and how old he must be to not know what was cool anymore. Eliot started to leave, saying, "Gotta go."

"Wait, I just want to tell everyone that we'll have a new patient living with us soon," John said.

Eliot stopped. Alice looked confused, then excited, asking, "Who is it?"

"He's a very kind young man. He'll be attending school with all of you and he'll be sharing Eliot's room. You'll be meeting him this afternoon," John said, a smile spreading across his face.

"What? Another _guy_?" Alice asked, disgruntled.

Eliot ran his hand through her hair again, making it stick up even straighter. She stomped on his foot, and he let out a harsh growl of pain. Dr. Thorough sighed at them and continued, "Yes, Alice, it is another male. I've asked some of the female patients, but when they see pictures of all of you, they find Eliot too attractive to live with."

The biggest smile Eliot could muster spread across his face, but Alice scoffed, stating, "If anyone finds Eliot attractive, they must

be deranged."

Again, Eliot tried to run his hand through her hair, but Alice dodged him. A honk from outside indicated Acker was there, so Eliot took off, not even bothering to ask Alice again about coming with him.

Penny was glad for that.

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><p>"This is not a meeting to blame you, Penny. I would just like to get your statement on what happened during lunch, yesterday."<p>

There was a long pause, and the voice asked, "Penny? Penny?"

He looked up at Principal Fogg, his brown eyes watching him in almost a mournful expression. He had already read Fogg's thoughts before he had Penny sit down a few minutes ago, and Penny knew that Fogg's expression was one of exhaustion from juggling gifted teenagers all day long. Penny had planned on explaining his story quickly before heading to lunch, but his thoughts were hampered today because he couldn't stop thinking about when Alice had kissed him the night before. Principal Fogg was not so impressed with his distraction.

"Penny, maybe we should work on a change of subject for the time being."

He nodded, not knowing what Fogg meant by that. Principal Fogg's thoughts changed to a different direction. Sometimes when people changed their minds, the difference took a little more time to read, like a car turning too quickly down a steep and narrow curve, wanting to adjust itself when the curve ended. Principal Fogg spoke before Penny could regather his thoughts, "You are a wonderful and model student here, Penny. You turn your work in on time, you attempt to pick up your grades when they slip, and you never talk back to the teachers. I shouldn't have to complain about you, but your sociability is a concern to me."

Fogg said, "_me_," but Penny could hear a thought in his mind stating, "_us_."

"I can't tell you to go out and make friends and be an outgoing person, and I certainly don't want to change what you feel comfortable with, but I am being told by the school board, out of concern for your progress, that you should attend counseling sessions on Thursday afternoons once a week."

Penny was shocked by this, not able to catch up with Fogg's thoughts before they were being said. Penny's eyes widened, and he asked, "What? Why?"

"The school board monitors every student here, and you as well as several others seem to be making no progress toward working with their issues and developing their abilities in what they see as a healthy and productive way. If you choose not to come to these

counseling sessions, I will be forced to place you in an alternative school where you will be monitored eight hours a day, alone with no other students; only the teachers to guide you."

Penny began to breath more heavily, panicking despite himself. His mind was racing, getting out of control. He gripped the arms of his chair, his vision blurry. There were a dozen small windows on one wall just parallel to him, and he could hear the glass beginning to break away as if under some kind of intense pressure. It was like his own mind, feeling fragile, beginning to break.

"Penny. Penny, please," Principal Fogg said calmly.

He was now standing beside Penny, his hand on Penny's shoulder. Penny looked at the windows and realized they were threatening to come crashing down. Penny calmed himself. The cracking stopped, and the windows remained motionless. Principal Fogg sat down beside him, observing him more closely, Fogg's hand still on his shoulder. Fogg's ability allowed his emotions to be more calm, like an instant safety net. He spoke to Penny kindly, even though Fogg's voice shook a little, "It will only be eight sessions, once a week. If you show progress with the counselor, you won't have to leave."

"Don't take her away from me," Penny said, barely registering what he was saying.

Principal Fogg's face became confused. He asked him, "What do you mean?"

"Alice. I need her."

Recognition came to Principal Fogg's face at the mention of Alice's name, but he misunderstood Penny's words, replying, "No, Penny, we aren't taking you out of Dr. Thorough's care. If you were to move to an alternative school, it would just be during the day."

"No, it's not that. At home, she is there. I know she is always there. At school, it's different. I hear them. I hear the students, the teachers. I hear their minds all day, all the time. I hear people at home three blocks away from school. I hear them **all the time**, I listen **all the time**. Alice is the only one at school who can hear me. She's the only person who listens to me."

He had not quite grasped how much information he was allowing to come out, and once it was said, Penny wondered if Principal Fogg would call Dr. Thorough, worried for Penny's mental health. Instead, Fogg put both hands on his shoulders and smiled. Fogg's thoughts were sincere. He seemed to be undaunted by Penny's words, but Penny could feel some slight fear in the back of Fogg's mind, not from what Penny had said, but because of how fast Penny's power had grown. Fogg told him in his calmest of tones, "I promise, you won't be left without her."

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><p>"Quentin! Quentin! Don't get so close to the street!"<p>

Sometimes Alice sounded like such a mother to Quentin. She closed her mouth and looked around her, wondering if anyone had noticed how shrill her voice just sounded. The other students filed out of school, some into cars, while others walked past, but no one showed the slightest bit of concern toward her. Penny was just coming outside then, and it made Alice forget how embarrassed she felt.

Penny walked up to her while Quentin continued to spin dangerously close to the street half a block in front of them. Penny kept his eyes on the street, but he could feel Alice's eyes watching him and a sense of warmth filled his mind. He turned to look at her just as Alice took hold of the last two fingers of his right hand, squeezing them lovingly. Another surge of warmth spread through his mind, and a memory came through the warmth.

The memory was of the first time he and Alice had a conversation, back when they were both eight-years-old. Penny had only been at Dr. Thorough's a week, and he hadn't spoken yet. He would watch the television in the living room, but the only channel he could tolerate was the snowy channel with no images on the screen, the images of people and stories made him dizzy at the time, when his power was still developing. Alice came out that morning, handed him a bag of pretzels and asked, "What you watchin'?"

Startled by someone speaking to him, he had looked back at her with his somber eyes, unsure whether to answer her or not. She stared at the snowy screen, devoid of images, the black and white drizzle like a pattern of wallpaper busily moving in the same motion over and over. Then she climbed her way onto the couch to sit next to him, grabbing pretzels out of the bag she had put in his lap to munch on them while she continued to watch the screen, saying, "This show is weird."

Penny remembered that he felt a sense of warmth in his mind then, too. Alice was the first person that caused physical reactions in him with her presence. Eliot usually caused a sensation of anger, while Penny's 3rd grade science teacher tended to create a cold chill. He liked the feeling of Alice near him the best.

"Quentin! Stop going out into the street!" Alice called out, breaking Penny away from the memory.

She still held onto his fingers, but Penny could not feel the warmth, anymore. It had left as suddenly as it began. This made him frown, and Alice noticed it. She asked him, "What's wrong?"

Acker's black truck whizzed past them before Penny could answer, coming dangerously close to Quentin, who was now jumping into the street. Alice broke out into a quick jog to get to Quentin and move him aside just in time. She was still faster than the average jogger, but it was obvious her feet were still hurting from yesterday, because she wasn't moving quite as fast as she could. Acker almost plowed into them and managed to catch a bit of the curb in the process. Quentin whipped around with his mouth gaping open, shocked at how close he came to being road kill.

The tires of the truck screeched to a halt just inches from them, then reversed more slowly. Acker stuck his head out of the passenger side window and said with a shrug, "Sorry, didn't see you there,

Alice."

Penny came up closer and saw that Eliot was in the driver's side of the truck. Alice was lifting each of her feet a little off the ground as if they were in pain, but she showed no damage on her face while she said to Acker angrily, "You almost hit _Quentin_, not me. He deserves the apology."

Acker rolled his eyes. Quentin's eyes were still widened in a state of shock. Alice remained unchanged, so Acker sighed and told Quentin without looking at him, "Sor-ry. Would you like a ride home?"

Penny could easily hear Acker's thoughts saying that he only wanted Alice to come, but even for those who couldn't read minds, it was obvious enough. Alice started walking away from the truck, her hand in Quentin's as she answered, "I don't ride with jerks."

The truck followed slowly behind her while Acker shouted out the window, "Come on! Hey! Come on, Alice! Look, you can bring your..._buddies_, alright?"

Again, the thoughts in his head displayed more than just wanting to say a simple word like buddies when referring to Penny and Quentin. Alice stopped and stared at Acker. Penny caught only a minor whisper of a thought from her mind. She was thinking to herself, _"My feet hurt."_

She stated to Acker, "Fine, we'll ride in back."

He looked disappointed that she wouldn't be sitting next to him in front, and Penny could see Acker's mind become even more disheartened when the image he had of putting his arm around Alice on the way home had to be dissolved. Penny couldn't help but smile at Acker's humiliation.

On the ride home, Quentin, still a little shocked by the incident, remained strangely quiet while he nestled his head in Alice's lap, his hands covering his ears. It was a habit Quentin did when the sound of the wind around him caused him to be physically uncomfortable. It was a sensation he felt when he tried to fly, which discouraged him from overcoming his fear of heights. Penny had read these thoughts from Quentin the last time he covered his ears in the wind. Quentin's red cape flew aimlessly around the back of the truck, and Alice reached out her hand to touch the ends of the cape while it flowed back and forth like wildfire.

Penny stayed close to her, his arm around her shoulders, while they rode past the sun setting behind the old hilltops near their home. Alice's blonde hair fell around her face and flowed with the wind much like Quentin's cape, a strand occasionally brushing against Penny's cheek. He looked down at her feet, wondering if they were still hurting, but her new shoes would not allow him to see any injuries. He looked back up to her face, but Alice was looking away from him, her eyes following the blur of trees and telephone poles.

Maybe Alice was thinking about the new foster kid? Maybe she was reconsidering taking a ride with Acker when he and Eliot nearly splattered Quentin all over the sidewalk. Maybe she was thinking about _him_. Not knowing what she was thinking was never an easy

thing for Penny. He watched her anyway, entranced by what only she could keep hidden from him. Her thoughts were a mystery, her gaze far away.

He would give anything to read her.

End
file.